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## FriendRaising:

### Engaging Your Board by Engaging Friends

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Much has been written about boards and fundraising. There are those who believe one of the primary responsibilities of a board member is to raise money - the "Boards should fundraise" camp - with a long list of reasons why. There are those who believe boards should not be required to raise money, with a similarly long list of reasons why. Most of the articles you will see about boards and fundraising focus on those 2 sides of the coin - whether or not boards should fundraise.

This article won't talk about any of that.

That is because we have found there is no point in arguing "should" - not just about this issue, but about most issues. We should lose weight, we should quit smoking, we should get more exercise - but do we do so just because we are told we should? More often than not, we are far less influenced by someone telling us we should do something, than by our own personal realities. When the doctor says, "You can do what you want, but if you don't make a change, you will be dead in 5 years..." - suddenly we WANT to diet, exercise, quit smoking!

Therefore, this article will start by looking at the reality of "Boards and Fundraising" and will suggest that maybe it is time to find paths that align with reality, instead of continuing to fight reality. Because that ongoing battle not only frustrates everyone involved, it is detrimental to what our organizations can accomplish for our communities.

Simply put, it isn't working.

### Facing Reality

There are numerous realities about "boards and fundraising". Because fighting those realities hasn't worked, perhaps it is time to instead acknowledge those realities and embrace them.

Here are just a few of the realities we have observed:

#### Reality #1: Board Members and Fundraising

For a variety of reasons, board members commonly hate to ask for money. Even when they are cajoled into saying they will do it, it is not unusual to find that they underperform their commitments. After all the videos on "teaching your board to fundraise" and all the consultants and all the classes - it is still the rare board that raises any significant portion of the dollars the organization brings in.

Board members hate the stage fright and the power positioning of asking, where suddenly a relationship of equals has changed to one who is vulnerable (the one doing the asking) and one who is placed on the other side of that awkward position. Friendship in this proud society is not typically about asking for favors, and there are few of us who feel comfortable even asking a friend to watch our house while we are on vacation. Add the layer of a society that places such emotional value on money, and it is no wonder many board members would rather have a root canal than ask their friends for money!



And so the first reality is that the "boards should fundraise" argument has not only proven it isn't working, but has proven to be a huge bone of contention in many organizations.

### **Reality #2: But I Don't Know Any Rich People**

There are indeed donors, often those of substantial means, who feel it is an honor to be asked for money. However the peers of most board members do not have significant means. Most are just average folks, making a living, worrying about sending their kids to college, just like so many board members themselves.

The interesting dynamic we have encountered, however, does not only come from those board members who insist, "But I don't know any rich people!" It comes from their friends - those average folks who are NOT board members. In my own professional and social realm, when I encounter individuals who are not on boards, one of the most common pleas I hear is this: "You advise nonprofits? Could you tell them to stop with all the events!? I can't go to any more galas or golf tournaments, and then I wind up feeling guilty and just sending them a check. Please tell them to stop doing these things!"

Is that the kind of donors we want? Guilt money? Does that build any sort of sustainability? (It hasn't worked so far - if it did, you wouldn't be reading this article!)

### **Reality #3: The Board as the Link to the Community**

One look at the org chart will tell you that the board is the link to the community, accountable to the community, connected to the community.

It is the community that will receive the benefit the organization provides, and it is therefore the community to whom the organization (i.e. the board) is accountable. The community includes donors, it includes volunteers, it includes clients and just plain individuals living in the community - all those folks receive the benefit the organization is accountable for providing. And the board is the organization's link to all of them.

So how can boards engage with the community, to accountably ensure the organization is providing the very most benefit possible to that community? And how can boards help engage the community with the very heart of the work the organization is doing, to ensure that work can continue?

### **Reality #4: Organizations Need Friends**

There is something board members can do as the link to the community - something board members don't mind asking for. It is a rare sort of thing - one that we not only can feel comfortable asking for, but when asked, the other party typically feels delighted to give it. No one feels diminished, everyone feels exalted.

Our organizations need friends. And that is something board members can ask for with comfort and excitement.

## **Friends**

A horrible thing has happened to the word "friend" in the nonprofit world. "Friend" has come to mean, "Someone who gives us money."

In our real lives, though, our friends are not the people we go to for money (see Reality #1 above!). Our friends are the ones who know us and love us, who are there to dance when times are good, and who are there with a shoulder to lean on and cry on when times are bad.

If our organizations had REAL friends, instead of simply "donors," imagine how different life would be!

An organization's friends will volunteer. They will arrange for speaking gigs. They will make connections. They will share their wisdom about your mission, about your programs. They will do all sorts of things - and, yes, they will give you money.

When all we ask for is money, we leave all the rest of that on the table!

As joyful a thing as friendship is in our personal lives, it is just as joyful a thing in an organization's life. And because the purpose of our organizations is to make our

communities better places to live, those friendships mean even more to both sides.

## "Fundraising is About Relationships"

It is usually at this point that fundraisers smile and nod, and say, "I've been saying this all along. Fundraising is all about relationship building!"

And since I have already angered those who think boards should fundraise, I might as well anger those who believe that "Fundraising-is-About-Relationship-Building" is the same thing as raising real friends for an organization.

"Fundraising is about building relationships," can be directly translated as follows:

If you don't get to know people well, it is harder to ask them for money.

If you do get to know people well, it is easier to ask for money.

Therefore, you should get to know people really well, so it will be easier to ask them for money.

Does the word "friendship" or "relationship" really mean, "when the time is right, we will agree on a price"? Is that really what our organizations are about at their core? Can we really create impact in our community when community members know the only reason we might be nice to them is because we will eventually want their money?

We can now add to that phenomenon a more recent phenomenon - those fundraising approaches that encourage board members to invite their friends to an event where, "We will absolutely not ask anyone for a dime," only to have those same friends invited to a hard-sell event a few months later, where they are told honestly and directly, "We will be asking you for money, and a lot of it!"

It is easy to see why board members tell us, "I don't feel comfortable giving the names of my friends to the organization, as I know, in one form or another, my friends will be hit up for money."

Money. We have so many emotional hang-ups about money. And every time we reinforce that "the point of having friends is so we can ask them for money - perhaps not now, but eventually..." - well, that just continues that pattern of board members feeling uncomfortable about sharing their precious friendships.

## Board Members and FriendRaising

If the point of FriendRaising efforts is not to ask for money, then what is the point? It will sound trite, but the point of friendship is friendship. The point of engaging the community (which is really what FriendRaising is all about) is an engaged community.

Friends will not let anything bad happen to the organization. They will help in ways you never dreamed possible. They will want to see good things happen, and will work like the devil to be sure nothing bad happens.

Friends share all their gifts with the organization, and are thrilled that the organization sees value in those gifts! They give what they have, whatever that is - and yes, quite often, it is even money. But it is not only money. It is usually far more.

And that is because they are acting like real friends. That's the point. If we had an army of friends, we would have everything we currently have, plus tons more.

The only road to sustainability is to engage the community in your work, to turn that community into an army of friends, spreading the roots of ownership of your mission and vision throughout the community, so the community would not dream of letting your mission die.

And as the link to the community, that is a job board members can do without fear.

## FriendRaising

FriendRaising (a.k.a. Community Engagement) is a simple thing. It is rooted in celebrating all the various gifts every person has to share. Isn't that what we do with our friends? We overlook their faults, because they make us laugh; because they invite us over for pizza when we've had a bad day; because they think our kids are adorable (or understand when they're being not-so-adorable). We celebrate what is

good in them, what is precious in them.

And that's how we make friends for our organizations. We get to know people, and we tap into one of the most special gifts each of us has - the desire to make our communities better places to live.

So how do we do that? We ask them to become part of our circle, however they fit. We talk to them about our mission, and we ask for their opinions about our mission, their thoughts, their wisdom, their life experience. We share our stories, and we ask them to share theirs. And we celebrate the connections we find between their experience and our mission.

## An Easy Strategy for Raising Friends

While we have used many FriendRaising strategies over the years, our favorite approach to engaging friends is what we have come to call "Community Sleuthing" - engaging by asking questions. Whether we do our sleuthing over breakfast, during a tour, in someone's office, or in a group, we have not found a single strategy more effective than sleuthing for engaging someone directly in the heart of your mission and vision.

The process of sleuthing is deceptively simple for something so powerful. It has to do with briefly telling your story, and then asking questions that invite your friend to engage him/herself with the work you are doing.

The questions you ask will not include, "How can we raise money?" or "How can we get our name out there?" Those questions are of the "it's all about me" variety. They tend to lead to a lot of disengaged brainstorming, with little useful coming out of those discussions because they always circle back to money, and money is not a particularly engaging subject.

Think about these 2 scenarios in your personal life. You call your friend Joe and ask him to lunch to pick his brain about your own life.

"Joe, I need to make more money. I am talking to all my friends to figure out how I can do that. Do you have any ideas about how I can make more money?"

vs.

"Joe, I am trying to figure out how I can make more of a difference in the world. I am talking to all my friends, because I respect how you feel about the world, to get input about the various ways I might be able to make more of a difference. I am thinking about volunteering, and I enjoy being with kids, but I'm not sure where to start. You have kids - can we talk a little about what kids need these days, and where you see our community's needs regarding kids? What are you seeing with your own kids? Their friends? Their schools?"

Which is the conversation that will keep Joe engaged with your options, long after you have spoken? Which is the line of questioning that will keep Joe thinking about your situation while he is driving home from the office, or over dinner that night with his wife, or while he is digging in the garden that weekend?

That is why the questions you will ask will relate to your mission, your vision for making the community an amazing place to live. They will engage your friends directly in the whole reason your organization exists, and the whole reason your board members joined the board in the first place - their enthusiasm for making a difference in your community.

"Now that I've shared a bit about the program we are thinking about building, is there something in particular about it that intrigues you? Excites you? Concerns you? Do you think we are on target? Are we missing the mark?"

"If you were going to send a friend to our program, what would you want to know first? What would make you skeptical about this kind of program?"

"Have you ever seen a modern dance performance? Is there a reason you have not? Do you think if you knew more about the thinking behind the performance, it might intrigue you to check it out? Are there other forms of expression you DO connect with? Any idea what it is that makes those connect with you more?"

"Do you know of anyone else in town doing anything related to this kind of work? Is there someone you think we should talk with before getting started?"

"We are thinking about expanding our youth program to the southeast part of town. You live there, and your kids go to school there. What are the issues your kids are facing? Do your kids ever tell you stories about things they've heard at school that might relate to this program? Is there anything we should know about? Who are the movers and shakers in that part of town? Who is the school principal? Could you introduce us to your child's teacher, so we can learn from her about what she sees from the kids at school?"

When a board member engages her friends at this level, she is asking for something all of us love to share - our opinions, our wisdom. The friendship actually GROWS from this, rather than feeling that awkward imbalance that can come with asking for money. If a friend comes to me and says, "I really need to pick your brain about this issue, because you know things I don't know," there is no way I am going to say no! I am honored that they respect my wisdom enough to think I might know something!

And when this happens, your personal friend has just become an "advisor" to the organization.

From there, it is an easy step to ask your friend to join you at a volunteer event - a day of stuffing envelopes, perhaps, or a yard-cleaning party, or whatever. Volunteer events are a great FriendRaising activity, as friends work and chat side-by-side. And suddenly, your friend is not only an advisor, but a volunteer.

From being a volunteer, it isn't a far stretch to ask your friend if you might speak at her Rotary about the work your organization is doing. Now your friend is a connector, a rainmaker.

And when your friend receives your newsletter, with a hand-written note (not even necessarily from you, but perhaps from the ED, because now she is really becoming a friend of the organization), and that note tells her how thrilled everyone at the organization is that she has had such an impact on the very heart of your mission... then yes, it is likely your friend will become a donor as well.

For more FriendRaising strategies  
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## The Benefits of FriendRaising

When we approach our personal friends to become engaged with something we feel passionate about, there are multiple benefits for our organizations. Here are just a few:

- 1) We are sharing ownership of the issues that concern our whole community, and sharing the road to making the community a better place to live - the road to our community's future. An engaged community is the only road to significant and lasting change.
- 2) By sharing that ownership of our community's future, we have a friend who will help in all kinds of ways, because they want to see the mission succeed, and they feel they have a stake in its success.
- 3) We are celebrating all the things we love about our friends, encouraging them to share with the community their potential, their gifts - frequently the things they don't think are anything special. "I have knitted all my life - I never dreamed that was something that could make a difference to anyone!"
- 4) Board members who participate in these kinds of FriendRaising activities become directly engaged with the mission in a way that has everything to do with effective leadership and governance.
- 5) Board members who become engaged in this way also learn dramatically more than they ever could in an orientation program, allowing them to make far more educated decisions at the board table.

## One More Thing

While we have been clear to note that we will not wade into the battle about whether or not boards should raise money, it is important to note the HUGE difference between raising money and giving money. Whether or not the board (or individual board members) chooses to raise funds, EVERY BOARD MEMBER MUST DONATE TO THE ORGANIZATION WITHIN HIS/HER MEANS TO GIVE. This is not an option.

The reasoning is simple. Giving to the organization is about credibility. If board members don't give to the organization, why should anyone else? Imagine the United States ambassador to France telling his French counterparts that he doesn't pay American taxes or provide any support to American causes. The same thinking applies to your board - the board's giving must be an example to the rest of the community.

We have worked with food banks and low income health clinics where a number of board seats were reserved for clients receiving service from the organization. If all they could afford to give was 25¢, they gave 25¢. And those organizations could proudly say that 100% of its board had donated to the organization.

The effect of a board that has all donated to the organization cannot be underestimated. When the organization can proudly state that even a single mom making minimum wage has given to the best of her ability, that creates an environment where all the organization's friends are encouraged to feel their own gifts will have meaning as well, whatever their gifts may be.

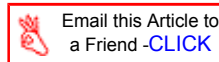
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## Conclusion

When we ask for money, that is all we get. When we ask for friendship, and the myriad wonders that come along with friendship, we get all that, plus all the surprises friendship can bring. Friends will offer their own creativity, their own ideas. "I was thinking the other day about something I'd like to do with my church group for the AIDS patients you serve...."

Friendship is the most valued possession in our personal lives. Sharing friendship with our organizations in a way that is respectful and engaging - that is something any board member can feel comfortable doing.

No shoulds. Just the reality that honest friendship feels good for everyone, builds an army of support for your organization's work, and is really the only way we can link arms to create significant improvement in the quality of life in our communities.



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